English Teaching: Practice & Critique, Volume 14, Issue 3

English language arts: past and future

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English education, known also as English Language Arts (ELA), has always been concerned with reflections on the past, understandings of the current and speculations about the future. Texts and contexts that we access and design carry enduring narrative threads of the human condition that link past, present and future. Our interrogation of these intertextual meanings and representations is central in the discursively structured pedagogic spaces of contemporary English classrooms.

In this issue of *English Teaching Practice and Critique*, we invited contributors to engage with the complex relationships between past present and future for teachers, students, texts and contexts. What endures or should endure? What has changed or needs to change? What are the implications of maintaining or re-visioning our practices and performances? What responsibilities do teachers of a powerful global language have with regard to the other languages spoken in our contexts? What new theoretical imaginings can we operationalise through English teaching?

The issue opens with what could be considered a depressing account by Jory Brass on the current standards regime in education that has taken hold globally. He focuses on how these standards govern English teaching in the USA to show how they serve neo-liberal agenda along with its technologies of managerialism, performativity and accountability. He shows how this new regime undermines the professional authority of the teacher and empowers private corporations to be the guardian of standards. This is an important article, which shows how what counts as English in the future is being reduced to narrow functional purposes. Amanda Stearns-Pfeiffer, on the other hand, offers a vision of how it is possible to work with imposed standards and to negotiate imposed measurement and control in a time of networked governance in education (Ball, 2012). She suggests an approach to both in-service and pre-service education that enables teachers to preserve their autonomy in the face of this threat.

As the standards for English increasingly emphasise the language arts – the skills needed to use language proficiently for practical and economic purposes – more creative, imaginative and literary aspects of English education have been side-lined. This is true in the teaching of English as both a home language and an additional language. Lifang Cui, Gillian Hubbard and Margaret Gleeson tackle this problem with a review of the literature on teaching English poetry in China where English is a foreign language. They are able to show the value that tertiary teachers of English ascribe to the teaching of literature. Terry Locke, on the other hand, appears to suggest that this battle is unwinnable and so looks for a more hospitable home for literature and creative writing by proposing it be located within the Arts. What effect, one wonders would this have on English, reducing it to a focus on language only? Given the undervaluing of the Arts in this new regime of quantifiability,

one also has to wonder at the effect this would have on the status of literature and creative writing.

Both surprising and interesting is the return to the oral in the articles in this issue. The value of spoken English is made explicit in Madonna Stinson's article "Speaking up about oracy". She talks about the importance of process drama as establishing a dialogic classroom within which primary school children are able to develop their communication skills. Heebon Park, similarly, argues for the importance of drama for developing fluency in English Foreign Language teaching in Korean tertiary classrooms. Dialogism is also stressed by Dennis Davis, Dot McElhone and Blake Tenore in their article on reader–text interactions.

Of particular interest in this regard is the article by Frank Sligo. He argues that print literacy is simply a historical moment – the Gutenberg Parenthesis – that is now coming to a close. He talks about the ways in which online writing and multimodal composition are closer to the co-operative forms of composing in an age of orality. Readers and writers can now cut and paste from the texts that they read, alter them, and write back to them. They can comment on and annotate these texts, tweet, retweet, blog and post online. Texts are no longer the individual, reified productions that they were during the Gutenberg period. Sligo provides a well-theorised positive reading of orality and argues for the re-evaluation of oral modes in tertiary education.

As Sligo shows, the spatial and temporal boundaries of learning have been recast as our attention has moved to accessing and producing knowledge in ways that move beyond passive consumption to active and interactive production (Beach *et al.*, 2011) which blurs oral, written and visual conventions (Maybin, 2013). Tat Heung Choi's article, which considers the remaking of Cinderella, is one such example. The agency needed to perform these literacies, however, is differential. For example, while many students have unprecedented opportunities to contribute to society through online networking (Lomborg, 2014), some students have limited or no access to these technologies. With these new patterns of engagement, comes the responsibility of understanding the implications of textual and cultural hybridisation (Jordan, 2012) and marginalisation across time and space. It is therefore surprising that our invitation for contributors to take up the racial, cultural, social, linguistic and socio-economic diversity of students in our classrooms that is increasing the richness of talent and complexities of need within our student groups (Roser *et al.*, 2011), was not broadly taken up.

Sligo's work is concerned with critical readings of text and the power of readers to contest what they read and to write back. Critical issues relating to power and identity are addressed in the articles that take dialogism seriously. Here, you see positioning and negotiation at work. Described as a dance, the strategies and tactics of students and teachers as they negotiate power are analysed by Julie Rust in an ongoing classroom interaction with one student. Her use of de Certeau (1984) provides an insightful approach to analysing classroom discourse critically. Chris Poulson uses a more conventional

approach to critical discourse analysis in reading the construction of gender in school magazines. The uncritical representation of women in these articles suggests the need for ongoing attention in English education. Given that migration is likely to continue to impact on the diversity of students in classrooms across the world, it would be worthwhile to interrogate the broader implications of representation in students' texts.

John Dixon's article provides the conclusion to this issue. We leave it to the reader to decide whether this look at the past provides a sense of hope or hopelessness. Is this simply nostalgia for a golden age of English Education or something to hold on to as we strive to confront the threats to our professional work now and in the future. We invite the reader to read it in relation to the questions that we posed for this issue. What lessons can we learn from the past? What endures or should endure? (Consider the practice of reading aloud in high schools – Warner and Crolla, this issue – as an example). What has changed or needs to change? What responsibilities do teachers of a powerful global language have with regard to the other languages spoken in our contexts?

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